

THEY CALLED HIM

BRUCE

Those Closest to Bruce Lee Remember His Incredible Impact

Interviews conducted by Marian K. Stricker

Ask the close friends of any man what they think of him, and you're likely to get an equal measure of agreement and disagreement. When that man is Bruce Lee, though, people's memories fasten quickly on a being full of energy and intelligence.

In the following article, people who knew Bruce Lee tell, in some instances for the first time, their memories of Bruce and how he affected their lives.

Linda Lee, for example, tells why her husband often felt financially insecure. Joe Lewis explains how his style was remodeled after Bruce. Bob Wall reveals the cinematic genius Bruce possessed. And Takay Kimura, in a rare interview, credits Bruce with restoring his self-esteem. Each saw Bruce slightly differently, according to his or her own experiences.

It is interesting to note how often these friends spoke of Bruce in the present tense. To them, he is still alive in their hearts, techniques, or philosophies. Listening to them, you may almost feel that you knew Bruce too. —Ed.

Linda Lee, Wife of Bruce Lee

Even my kindergarten kids know who Bruce is, and they weren't even born during his lifetime. I've certainly thought about what gave him that quality, because I never would have dreamed that 14 years later I would still be giving interviews about him.

There's a continuing interest, possibly because Bruce had so much style and screen presence. He seemed almost alive on screen, practically coming out into the audience, more than anyone else I've seen who makes films in this genre.

The thing is, Bruce can never make a bad picture now. He is never going to get old and funny looking. He can never do anything terrible in his personal life that's going to cause his public to hate him. He can do no wrong. He was a young man who died in the peak of health and vitality, who died under strange circumstances. It's like a Hollywood story that leads to something mystical or mythical that legends are made of.

Bruce was not really different in real life than he was on the screen. Obviously, he didn't go around kicking bad guys out of trees, but he was a very dynamic person, and he was the type of person who could walk into any room and be the center of attention.

He was energy. He could be very sincere, loving and close; not to everybody, but to those he chose to be special in his life. He was also very intelligent, so he could carry on a conversation about things other than martial arts.



Linda Lee, who has never remarried since the death of her husband more than 14 years ago, is amazed by the continuing interest martial artists show in Bruce Lee.

He could be a lot quieter at home, and he was very studious. He was reading all the time and was an avid book collector. He would be stretching, squeezing a ball with one hand, watching television, and reading at the same time. Or he could just sit and write. And yet, he could at any moment say "Linda, come here. Now hold your hands like this. Now let me see, if I do this . . ." You never knew what to expect; he was not a predictable person.

He could be romantic, but not in the standard way. In fact, I used to say "flowers are nice," and he'd say "flowers are useless; they go away in one day."

He'd think of little things, though. When we went to the University of Washington, we used to meet after my swimming class, and I had my hair in braids. On our first date we went to the Space Needle in Seattle. It was a really big deal for me, who'd never been farther than the local hamburger stand. He bought this little kewpie doll that was so cute. It had its hair in braids, and it was supposed to be me.

Martial arts really was the love of his life; that was his pas-



Bruce Lee chats above with Bob Wall (far left) and Chuck Norris (center) on a movie set. Wall, an actor and producer, calls Lee a "cinematic genius" and perfectionist.

sion. Acting and filming was his work. I guess I'd have to say that in the last couple years when we lived in Hong Kong, it became almost burdensome to him, because people were making a lot of demands on him. Filming was very hard and he would get exhausted sometimes. He'd work all day, or all night, and when he came home there would be people giving scripts to him, saying "you gotta do this, you gotta do that." He felt the pressure, all the time that we were married, of wanting to provide the best life that he could for me and the children. That was really important to him. There were a lot of times that we had very little money. He had a lot of trouble getting work in the United States because there was a prejudice against non-Caucasian actors, especially for leading roles. He had a hard time with that, and it weighed on him very much. That's why he worked as hard as he did.

At the time he died he really did not feel financially secure yet. *Enter the Dragon* didn't even come out until after he had died, and the first two movies that he made he just got a flat payment. Residuals take so long to come in from a film, so when we were living in Hong Kong, though we were living well enough, it was mostly advances on what the royalties were expected to bring in, so that made him kind of insecure.

I really appreciated his spontaneity. He used to do the little things that mean a lot. He used to bring me home Juju Fruits, which I love. He'd be involved in all these lengthy sessions with other guys on martial arts, or long, tedious filming, and then to realize that he could think "Wait, I'm going to stop at this store and get Linda some Juju Fruits." It kind of had a lot of meaning to it.

Taky Kimura, Student of Bruce Lee

I met Bruce a short time after he arrived in Seattle, when he was around 17 years old. Even then there was a distinct quality of greatness, but on the other side there was that typical teenager.

He was somewhat flamboyant, full of energy, and light-hearted. He learned about the American social atmosphere immediately, and he melded right in. At first he was a little bit hesitant because he spoke sort of a British version of English, and at that time he also stuttered a bit. He had a little difficulty trying to enunciate and to express himself.

Of course no one ever kidded him about that; it would have been a disaster. But another young friend of mine stuttered rather badly, and when I introduced him to Bruce, he stuttered. I could see Bruce tense up because he felt this guy was making fun of him. So my friend quickly said "No, I stutter too!" and then we all laughed.

I was 38 when I first met him, almost old enough to be his father, but as I got to know Bruce more, I found he was a

strong, intelligent type that was very strongly steeped in Oriental mysticism and philosophy. We are both Oriental and, well, blood is thicker than water, and I think he felt closer to me because of that. He needed someone that he could depend on for more than martial arts. So he took me aside, took me under his wing, and started to groom me as his assistant.

When I met Bruce, I had no respect or regard for myself. Largely through Bruce's efforts, I realized that I am a human being and I have equal rights and I'm just as good as anyone else. That comes from this wonderful philosophy of the martial arts that Bruce was so richly endowed with.

Bob Wall, Actor and Martial Artist

Bruce was a cinematic genius as well as a martial arts genius. He prepared for his films intensely, maybe too intensely. He was fanatical about being the best, and that's the reason he was the best.

If you didn't know him real well, he seemed somewhat unfriendly on a film, but it wasn't that he was unfriendly, it's that he was concentrating so much that you didn't see him smile often. I found him a lot less funny on a movie set because there were always a zillion crosscurrents of problems for Bruce. He felt the prejudice of being a minority, yet he was determined to be a superstar, and that left no time for levity. Had he lived he would have been a superstar to this day, without question. He was so versatile that he could have done a million different things.

To prepare for his acting roles he studied, studied, studied. He knew everyone's part in the film before the cameras rolled. He was flawless on the set, what you'd call an actor's actor, very professional. He came early, ready to do his lines, and expected that of the other actors.

In *Return of the Dragon*, I personally think he took on too much. Even a genius has his limitations, and Bruce killed himself on that film. He was working many hours on very little sleep, and he was so concerned that everything be perfect.

For example, *Return of the Dragon* was one of the first foreign films shot in the Colosseum. The Colosseum was closed, but Bruce was determined that the gladiator scenes would be done there. It took a lot of work and a lot of connections, but Bruce was extremely popular in Rome, and through his magnetism, his charm, his brains, and his reputation, we got in there and filmed. That determination was the main source of his success.

He was the premier cinematic genius about getting what he wanted on film. A lot of martial artists think because



Don Lee and a blindfolded Bruce Lee work on "sticky hands" exercises, above. Don Lee claims that Bruce inspired his martial arts students to "search for excellence."



Joe Lewis (left)
claims Bruce Lee's
"reluctant" intelligence was phenomenal. He could
immediate an idea
into a martial concept,
and then into a physical action."

they're talented they can get that talent on the screen, but Bruce understood that you had to shoot with several different cameras, from several different angles, lots of coverage, and when he wasn't in front of the camera he was behind it, watching everything that happened. He wanted the film to be as good as it could be.

Don Lee, Student of Bruce Lee

I saw Bruce Lee's first demonstration in Long Beach (California), and I was fully impressed by his speed, power, and way of explaining martial arts in view of the Chinese philosophy. Being Chinese myself, studying philosophy and the martial arts, I never seemed able to put the two together. Bruce seemed able to integrate the two, so I wanted to study with him.

In class, instead of just talking about punching and kicking, Bruce would tell you to relate the force to the yin and yang (complementary opposites). Not to just strictly use brute force, but to be aware at the time of receiving the energy that it is time to expend energy.



Above, Bruce Lee meets Ed Parker (center) and Ralph Castro (far right) for the first time. Castro claims Bruce was very humble, but also very outspoken.

Bruce would say "if you want to swim, get in the water. No frame of mind on dry land will do you any good." Similarly, if you want to do the martial arts, you have to know what that impact feels like. Bruce initiated full-contact training, with protective gear. That was quite dramatic compared to other martial arts at the time.

He said "I have no design. My action is the result of your action. It's a sound-and-echo relationship." The men who trained with him were used to drilling all the techniques, disregarding the situation, whereas Bruce said to feel the situation, and fit into it. This was a dramatic revelation to us.

Bruce would look at each person's form as he went through the training, and would personally prescribe a supplementary training program. It was a very personal thing. The first few months were just sheer physical training. Many people got discouraged and left. It was Bruce's way of testing a person's sincerity and willingness to train hard.

At the dojo (school), he was definitely the teacher, and he demanded total attention. Away from the dojo though, he was a friend. We'd go to Chinatown, have lunch. He liked to joke, share, tell about his experiences. I'd trained with different teachers, and they were usually so solemn. Bruce, however, was quite young, robust, and he was genuinely interesting.

I was really impressed by his discipline. Bruce definitely had a sense of calling. There was something waiting for him, to be accomplished. I was just astounded by his hours of rigorous training. What we see on the screen, his accurate form

Bruce Lee and Wally Jay (right)
shared their knowledge of the martial arts. Jay claims Bruce's speed was overwhelming, "like a fly that moves before you can touch it."



and speed, is the result of dedication. It was very inspiring to see a very small frame transformed into almost a superhuman by sheer mental determination. Bruce had a mission to revolutionize kung fu. He made movies to demonstrate the effectiveness of his form, not just to make money.

Bruce promoted the idea of constantly searching for the truth, absorbing things that are useful for you and discarding what does not work, until you have something uniquely your own. Each student that studied with him developed his own skill, instead of being limited by what Bruce taught. Bruce wanted us to continue on.

He was always looking forward, moving ahead. Each time we saw him there was something changed. Bruce said "Don't say you've matured, say you're maturing. Be constantly in an upward search for that ultimate reality." Bruce inspired us to search for excellence.

Joe Lewis, Student of Bruce Lee

I met Bruce at BLACK BELT magazine in 1986. He tried to explain his system to me, but at that time I had a real negative



M. Uyehara (far left), owner of **BLACK BELT** magazine, chats with Bruce Lee's mother, Hoi Chuen, and his brother, Robert. Uyehara claims Bruce's dedication to the martial arts was "crazy."

attitude about the realistic applications of kung fu. Here was this little guy, what does he know about fighting? So I just screened him out. Then we met again at the 1967 National Championships. Mike Stone talked me into taking a good look at Bruce and listening to what he had to say about his fighting strategies and theories.

Bruce figured if he could get the three biggest names in the martial arts—Stone, Chuck Norris and myself—as students, that would be a feather in his cap. He did succeed in doing that, and I used to hear him brag about it and say "Don't tell me I'm not a master."

His abstract intelligence was phenomenal. He was very good at conceptualizing. He could translate an idea into a verbal concept, and then into a physical action. Only a handful of martial arts instructors can do that, and that's what impressed me.

Every time I'd go to his house, the very first thing he'd do was pull up his sleeve to show me how hard his forearm was. Then he'd lift up his shirt and show me how tough his stomach was getting. Then he'd show me a kick he was working on. It was always that same routine: forearm, stomach, kick. He wanted to share the pleasure in his own physical development.

He was probably the most charming person I ever met. He could charm a queen, he could charm a bum. He really liked himself; he had a high self-esteem. He had a benevolent sense of life. He loved his family, the Chinese culture, his students, and how they were growing and maturing from lesson to lesson.

He was also bragging about how much money he was charging: ten lessons for \$500. At that time it was unheard of. When he started getting big, he was charging \$200 an hour. But Bruce was worth it, because you wanted the gift he had. He had that magic, that stage presence.

He did a major job of remodeling my style, so that I could better adjust to different types of opponents. Bruce Lee's premise about fighting was to put your power side forward. I tried that for awhile and it worked well for me. He taught me to create change-ups in my tactics, so it would be difficult for opponents to adjust to me.

Ralph Castro, Friend of Bruce Lee

Bruce and I hit it off right away and became very close friends. It was not just exchanging the knowledge of our styles, it was general information about what was happening in the martial arts world, and how he applied it.

I was very happy that when Bruce made it in the movies, I didn't see any difference in his character. He always had respect for me and my family. Whenever we saw him, say at the national championships, he'd quickly walk up and say hello. That's how a true friend is. He was very humble. Of course, he was also very outspoken. If there was anything he didn't like about a style or a person, he didn't hold back. And there was nothing that anyone could say against him because he'd always prove his point.

He was a great imitator. He could imitate a person's style like someone who'd trained for years. Bruce would demonstrate that particular style in a few short minutes, and his performance looked better than the person who had studied it.

Bruce asked me if I wanted to learn from him, but I said "Bruce, how much more do I really need? Why can't we just share what we are now and be what we are now? Let's just be friends." I didn't want to hound him. A lot of guys who knew him were right away trying to seek more from him, but I respected him for what he was. If he wanted to show me something, I was open-minded to it. I recognized what he had to offer and it was excellent, it was very impressive, but I felt what I had was impressive too, in my way.

His attitude was unique. He was very clever and could make you laugh. I don't care what people say about him being arrogant. He was arrogant only when he had to be. If you didn't know him, and you upset him, he'd tell you about it. Once you knew him, you had a good friend.

Wally Jay, Friend of Bruce Lee

Bruce was such a good technician. And he was a great showman, but he could do what he said he could do. He was really sure of himself, and he knew how to hold a crowd. He might be walking down the street, and suddenly he would jump into a stance. Then he would have a mischievous expression that reminded me of Fred Astaire, watching to see people's reactions.

Once we met in an Oakland restaurant. I went downstairs and a man asked me if Bruce was up there. I said yes, and the man said "Which one is he?" I answered "I don't have to tell you. Go up and watch him." He could see right away which one was Bruce Lee. When Bruce Lee talked, everyone listened.

He and I used to exchange ideas, yet I never say that I taught Bruce. We shared ideas. We had a good rapport. He respected me because I was more well-known at the time.

He had a lot of compassion, but he tried not to show it. He was really soft inside.

He had a speed that nobody possesses. It was hard for anyone to imitate him. Bruce was born fast, like a fly that moves before you can touch it. It was something about his structure and his muscles. I'd never seen anybody that fast. It was overwhelming.

They'll never be another like Bruce Lee. He was a great man, and a nice person. How many people can be a personal friend of someone like that?

M. Uyehara, **BLACK BELT** Magazine Owner

When I first met Bruce, he clicked with me, but I didn't know why I liked him. A guy like Bruce, usually I can't stand him, because he's real cocky. But I liked him right away. Some people, maybe because they were jealous of him, didn't like him at all.

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Joseph Corwin, holding a picture of Bruce Lee at right, claims Bruce could be alternately moody and happy-go-lucky, but always "made you want to give 110 percent."



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BRUCE

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His dedication to the martial arts was crazy. He couldn't keep still, and he perspired a lot. Perspiration was ch/ with him. So he used to take his shirt off, and a lot of guys thought he was showing off. He was all muscle.

Herb Jackson, Ted Wong and myself used to meet every Wednesday at Bruce's house in Culver City. He was so fast. He used to tell me to throw a jab, and he'd catch my hand. He would stand with his two feet together, throw a side kick, and as soon as the one foot would land, the other would kick. Amazing! He was so beautiful, and so rhythmic.

Sometimes he acted like a child. He was real frugal, and yet sometimes he'd spend money on crazy things. One time he bought a red Porsche. He loved it. Every time we'd pass another like it, he'd toot his horn.

He was also very generous, secretly picking up the tabs when we went to lunch.

He loved children. We'd meet four or five young black kids, and Bruce would speak to them in their lingo. They'd say "Hey, man, you're all right!"

Joseph Cowles, Student of Bruce Lee

I had a rough introduction to Bruce's class. He asked me to engage in zan-sing, an arm-toughening exercise, and I guess I pressed him a bit too far, because he suddenly struck me in the temple so hard that it hurt for a week. He said calmly "You didn't get your arm up in time."

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BRUCE

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I know now that that was a warning, but I kept hitting his arms, and then he really started turning it on. Bruce finally looked at me coldly and said "Don't be a hero! If it hurts, stop! Or I'll break your damned arm!" He told me afterward that he admired me for practicing at my age, and then we arm-wrestled across the cafe table. I didn't win then, either.

Bruce was kind of moody, but he was happy-go-lucky at other times. I'd catch him glaring during class and wonder what he was mad about, but later we were all friends. Between the salutation and bowing out, it was strict; he made you want to give 110 percent.

Many people have speculated that Bruce was flashy, but not a real fighter. Anyone who really trained under Bruce knows better. Bruce once told us "You will never convince someone by knocking him down."

Once I asked him if one technique was better than another, and he said "Nothing is best. It's what fits the moment that's best."

There are two people who influenced me most in my life, and that's my foster mother, and Bruce Lee, because of his personality and drive. He was very straightforward and honest. He could even be modest when he fought. He had a way that appealed to young people—the way he dressed, the way he carried himself. There was nothing fake about him.

He was a good example, not only as a teacher, but as a man. Knowing Bruce was a very great privilege, one I'll always treasure.